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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to compare the reading achievement of third graders who had attended kindergarten for one year with that of third graders who had been given two years of kindergarten. A review of the literature revealed that the majority of studies in this area showed that the practice of retaining students did not serve the intended purpose of increasing the students' academic growth. In the current study, subjects were 142 third graders, 25 of whom had been retained in kindergarten and 117 of whom had been promoted after one year in kindergarten. A standardized reading test was administered. The results of the data analysis indicated no significant difference between the test scores of the retained and promoted students. No positive effects of retaining children in kindergarten on children's later academic achievement were found. It is suggested that developmental maturation, while important, is but one of many factors in a child's ability to learn and profit from school. Implications for educational improvement are provided. A list of 34 references is appended.
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*EFFECTS OF TWO-YEAR KINDERGARTEN PROGRAMS
AT THE END OF THIRD GRADE*

BY

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*Thesis Presented to the Faculty of Dominican College
Department of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in
Education: Curriculum and Instruction*

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EFFECTS OF TWO-YEAR KINDERGARTEN PROGRAMS AT THE END OF
THIRD GRADE

INTRODUCTION

One of the most commonly used methods for "protecting" children from increased academic demands is retention: holding a student for a second year in the same grade. The assumption is that if children are retained, they "catch up" on prerequisite skills and are at less risk of failure when they are finally promoted to the next grade. Retaining students is also used as a means to raise education standards. Schools enforce strict promotion standards at every grade level trying to ensure the competence of high school graduates and to lower the dropout rate.

As an alternative to retention, some schools provide "unready children" with alternative programming: developmental kindergarten (followed by regular kindergarten), transition or pre-first grade, or repeating kindergarten. An extra year in kindergarten is intended to protect unready children from entering too soon into a demanding academic environment where they may experience failure. The proponents of two-year kindergarten programs see this form of retention as a way for the school to respond to the enormous differences in background experiences, developmental stages, and aptitudes of young

children. This policy is viewed as having the child's best interests at heart and as a means of preventing failure before it occurs. On the other hand, opponents of retention claim that repeating a grade does not ensure subject mastery, nor will maturity gained from an extra year of kindergarten alleviate social, emotional or academic difficulties. (Shepard & Smith, 1988)

Does retaining students or placing youngsters in a two-year kindergarten program provide a helpful remedy for these "unready" children? Is it beneficial both academically and socially to the children?

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of two-year kindergarten programs on children's third grade reading standardized test scores. It is to determine whether there is a significant difference in students' reading achievement at the end of third grade between those who have attended two years of kindergarten as compared to those who attended one year of kindergarten.

The term "Kindergarteners" refers to students attending grade(s) before first grade. In this study, children were evaluated by the Gesell Kindergarten

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Screening Assessment and placed accordingly in either a kindergarten or prekindergarten classroom. The term "Two-Year Kindergarten Program" is used to describe this process. For example, if a child's performance is interpreted as developmentally immature for their chronological age, they are given the "gift of time." This gift consists of attending a pre-kindergarten, often called "developmental kindergarten" or "phase I," for one year followed by a "regular kindergarten" or "phase II." Another term used in this study is "standardized tests," those tests which have been nationally normed and standardized.

RATIONALE

The idea of developmentally appropriate educational practice, that the curriculum should be matched to the child's level of cognitive ability, is favorably received in education circles. Many educators believe the developmental philosophy deriving from the research and theory of Jean Piaget. This advocates that all individuals, except the retarded, are able to develop cognitive abilities, though not at the same age. Piaget believes there is a relationship between learning experiences and the rate of development. (Elkind, 1989)

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Other educators believe the developmental philosophy of Arnold Gesell. This theory advocates that a child's development is directed from within and unfolds in fixed sequences. He called this process maturation and believed that it is this internal governor, not the child's interactions with the world, that directs the physical and psychological growth of an individual. (Mergendoller, Bellisimo, & Horan 1990) The Gesell philosophy is based on hereditarian theory, and is contrasted with environmentalist and behaviorist learning theory.

The more modern conception of cognitive development, the Piagetian theory, has replaced these extreme theories and is more interactional; that is, the joint influence of both environment and heredity on learning is acknowledged. It gives more importance to learning experiences in determining the rate of development. (Smith & Shepard, 1985)

Both Piaget and Gesell believed instruction should be "matched" to where a child is developmentally. Gesell advocates placing a developmentally young child in a slower program while Piagetian advocates teaching one small step above a child's current development and not withholding instruction or "teaching down" to these developmentally young children. Cognitive stimulation is essential for

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children to progress from one developmental level to the next. (Shepard & Smith, 1985) Gesell's theory, however, assumes that a child's natural maturational process cannot be accelerated. Hence, Gesell supporters firmly believe in a two-year kindergarten program while educators following Piaget's philosophy oppose it.

Which practice should educators implement to ensure children are given the best chance to succeed in school? Although both theories agree children develop at different rates, different approaches are employed incorporating each method. Gesell might put a developmentally young child in prekindergarten. If that child then excelled quickly, could the child skip to first grade? The chance of skipping to first grade is remote because the child will not have been taught necessary skills for first grade and must procede to kindergarten.

Schools incorporate two-year kindergarten programs designed so the children will not be retained later. Yet, is there a difference between retained and nonretained students?

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SIGNIFICANCE:

Many schools have implemented formal promotion-retention and testing policies in response to school reform to ensure that students with inadequate skills will not be passed on to the next grade. Those retained are likely to be poor, males, and minorities, although holding students back is practiced to some degree in both rich and poor schools. (California State Department of Education, 1988)

The practice of retaining children is almost universal in the United States. Shepard and Smith estimate approximately half of all students in the U.S. have repeated a grade by their first year of high school, or are no longer in school. Most teachers, administrators, and the public are strongly in favor of retention. Retention practices reflect the belief that less damage to a child's social relations with peers occurs, and that less stress is incurred in early grades than in later grades; the highest retention rates are in kindergarten and first grade. (Doyle, 1989) Yet, drop out rates are higher than ever before and many children are graduating without adequate skills. Retention is not ensuring all high school graduates are competent in basic skills such as reading and writing.

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Those who hold a child back for an additional year do so despite evidence that negative effects outweigh positive outcomes. Three recent major reviews of the general literature on retention (Jackson, 1975; Niklason, 1984; Rose, Medway, Cantrell, and Marus, 1983) conclude that retained "at-risk" students are actually behind promoted "at-risk" children in all academic areas; social adjustment, self-concept, and attitudes towards school. Studies, dating back to 1911, show the effects of retention are traumatic to children and that the retained children do worse academically in the future, with many of them dropping out of school. (Holmes & Matthews, 1984)

Holmes and Matthew systematically conducted a literature search identifying studies that were potentially relevant. After conducting manual and computer searches, 44 studies were included in their meta-analysis. Criteria for inclusion were: (a) presentation of the results of original research of the effects on pupils of retention in the elementary or junior high school grades, (b) sufficient data to allow for the calculation or estimation of an effect size and (c) comparison of a group of retained pupils with a group of promoted pupils. A total of 11,132 pupils were included in these 44 investigations. There were

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4,208 non-promoted pupils, with 6,924 regularly promoted pupils serving as controls. As few as 30 and as many as 1,929 pupils were involved in individual studies.

Holmes and Matthews identified and mathematically integrated data from all 44 studies to determine the effect of grade-level retention on elementary and/or junior high school pupils. When each effect size calculated was treated equally, a grand mean effect size of $-.37$ was obtained. By using the effect sizes from only those studies in which the promoted and nonpromoted pupils had been matched, a grand mean of $-.38$ was calculated. The high degree of consistency in this measure lends credibility to these findings. Results from the meta-analysis indicated that non-promoted students make less progress than low-achieving students who are promoted. This finding held true for every dependent variable examined, from achievement in academic areas to social and emotional adjustment. The analysis from the studies found nonpromotion has negative effects. Harmful effects of retention were most pronounced in reading. This is particularly noteworthy because slow progress in reading is the reason most commonly given for requiring children to repeat grades.

However, some advocates of kindergarten retention deny that conclusions from Holmes' review are pertinent because repeating kindergarten is intended to be different from non-promotion at other grade levels. It comes before academic failure and it is meant to be a preventive treatment. Many feel that at this age, social stigma is not as pronounced as with older students. Consequently, it is unwise to generalize the findings from research on later-grades' retention to what might happen in kindergarten.

One advocate of two-year kindergarten programs was Arnold Gesell. He believed that a child's behavior is a function of growth that is structured, orderly, predictable, and measurable by a screening test. The Gesell School Readiness Tests, or Gesell Developmental Tests, are intended to assess a child's developmental age, which is an interdependent composite of social, emotional, intellectual, and physical functioning. The developmental concept views the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual aspects of a child as interdependent and believes that one aspect should not be pushed ahead of the others (Gesell Institute of Human Development, 1982). According to this philosophy, a child performs best in school if started and promoted on the basis of developmental age. In the Gesell program, options for these

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children are the following: (1) attend a prekindergarten for one year followed by kindergarten the next year; (2) spend two years in kindergarten; (3) stay at home a year and attend kindergarten the next year; (4) or attend kindergarten and then a prefirst-grade class. Many schools use the two-year kindergarten program.

Unlike the 650 references on grade retention with older groups found by Holmes, relatively few controlled studies exist on the effects of two year kindergarten programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

May and Welch (1984) assessed the effects of developmental placement and early retention on children's later scores on standardized tests. They concluded there were no positive effects on children's later academic achievement. Their findings contradict the academic rationale for the Gesell Institute's advocacy of developmental placement.

In the May and Welch study, the relationship between early school retention as a result of preschool and kindergarten developmental testing and children's later academic achievement was examined. Two hundred

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twenty-three children from grades 2 through 6 who were enrolled in an suburban homogeneous white middle-class elementary school were coded into three groups, depending on their scores on the Gesell Screening Test and their subsequent school placement. Children selected for the study were students who stayed at the school from Kindergarten through third grade. Each was assigned a subject number which was coded according to the Gesell placement status. Children whose scores (4.5 or below) on their Gesell Screening Test, indicating developmental immaturity, were recommended by the school's staff to spend three years in school before second grade. In this group there were two subgroups. First, those children whose parents had them take an extra year before second grade, the "Buy A Year" (BAY) children, and second, those developmentally immature children who did not take an extra year because of parental requests, the Overplaced (OP) children. These OP children followed the traditional route through school. The BAY group was the experimental group and the OP children served as the control group. A final group of children, those who tested developmentally mature, was coded as traditional (TR); these children were placed in a typical kindergarten along with the OP children. The

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children for this study were 100 white males and 123 white females, with 62 BAY children (35 males, 27 females), 59 OP children (27 males, 32 females), and 102 TR children (38 males, 64 females).

Their performances on the full Gesell Developmental Test, the 3rd grade New York State Pupil Evaluation Program (PEP) Tests in reading and math, and the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) were compared. Those children who scored as immature on the Gesell Screening Test and who were retained a year according to the Gesell Developmental Placement Program had the lowest scores on all measures. These children were almost a year older than the other two groups of children at the time of the PEP and SAT testing.

There were significant differences ($p=.01$) among all three Gesell status groups on the full Gesell Developmental Test administered at the end of kindergarten. The children in the TR group scored significantly higher ($p=.01$) on the New York Third-grade Reading PEP Test than did the BAY group. There were no significant differences between the BAY and OP children, or between the TR and OP children. The mean score was 74.17 for the TR group, 59.29 for the BAY group, and 64.96 for the OP group.

There was a significant difference ($p=.05$) in the

scores between the TR and BAY groups on the SAT. There were no significant differences between the TR and OP groups or between the OP and BAY groups. The mean score was 152 for the TR group, 143 for the BAY group, and 150.98 for the OP group. Analysis of variance followed by Scheffe' multiple comparison post hoc procedures were used to test the difference among the three groups.

These measures are primarily academic and intellectual and did not include many of the social-emotional or motor components of development that the Gesell Institute values. However, conclusions from the study indicated that providing students with the extra year to mature may not be the best way to improve academic development.

Other research such as Yamamoto (1980) needs to be examined as well. Yamamoto found that, next to blindness and death of a parent, children rate the idea of retention as most stressful.

Shepard and Smith (1985) published an extensive review of the reliability and validity of the Gesell tests as an instrument for either placing a child in a two-year kindergarten, advising parents to have the child wait a year, retaining a child in kindergarten, or placing a child in a pre-first grade. They point out that the authors of the

Gesell test do not furnish information on the reliability of the test. Additionally, only one published study using the Gesell has ever reported a reliability coefficient. Kaufman (1971) reports a reliability of .84 which approaches the standard of .90. However, in that study the standard errors of measurement were such that a child who was developmentally five years old could not be reliably distinguished from 4 1/2 or 5 1/2 year-olds. The tests, normed in the 1940's in one high socio-economic community of white children in Connecticut, are unrepresentative of other groups and are also dated. Moreover, the authors give no indication of normal ranges of performance. There is not a specific scoring scheme nor is an average score computed. The validity of the Gesell test is also in question. In a predictive study by Wood, Powell, and Knight, (1984), for any group of children identified as unready, half will be misidentified. Also, research by Jensen (1980, 1981) suggests that the Gesell test lacks discriminant validity from IQ tests. Therefore, more low socio-economic and minority children may be identified by the test as "developmentally young."

Shepard and Smith also conducted a computer-assisted search using descriptors such as kindergarten retention and developmental kindergarten and published their findings in

their book, Flunking Grades Research and Policies on Retention (1989). They contacted school districts identified by the Gesell Institute (1988) as having successful developmental programs and obtained copies of their evaluation or research reports. The resulting 15 new empirical studies, primarily dissertations, were categorized by their degree of control. "No control" meant that only data for the retained group were reported or that the retained group was inappropriately compared to normal grade peers. Studies with "minimal control" were those with comparison groups who had been recommended for retention, sometimes called the "refusal" group; but there was no measure of the initial equivalence of the groups. Studies with "adequate control" compared retained children to promoted, at-risk children after matching initial readiness or using some form of statistical adjustment. The outcomes of controlled studies were classified as positive, negative, or no difference.

Researchers summarized findings from the controlled groups, giving greater attention to the studies with "adequate controls." The predominant finding was one of no difference. After having been retained in kindergarten, children were no better off in first grade (or later) than

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similarly at-risk children who went directly to first grade. For example, Kilby (1982) compared graduates of a Junior First Grade Program with non-retained program-eligible students across three separate years. Initial scores were used to make covariance adjustments. There were no significant differences between the groups on achievement measures at the end of first grade, second grade, or fourth grade. Kilby also examined eighth grade test scores for 12 of these junior first graders and found they were consistently behind in achievement compared to a representative sample of the non-retained, but program eligible children. When covariance adjustments were applied to the same data, the children who had been junior first graders were above their own expected scores in reading for three years. Then in seventh and eighth grade, the reading scores fell below expectation. Through their entire school career they were behind in math.

Five other studies the researchers analyzed showing no difference were May and Welch (1984), from earlier; Caggiano (1984), found no difference on standardized achievement measures at the end of second, fourth, and sixth grades between Gesell-identified children who spent an extra year in transition room and those whose parents

refused the extra year; Kirkwood School District (1984) found that children who had "barely passed" into first grade outperformed transition children; Mossburg (1987) matched two groups of 149 children first entering kindergarten. The readiness room children were ahead at the end of first grade (though not significantly so) yet by the end of the second, third, and fourth grades, the control children had surpassed the extra-year children and were significantly higher on reading, math and composite standardized achievement test scores. The developmentally immature children who had refused the extra year were also significantly higher on social, emotional, and academic readiness for middle school as judged by fifth grade teachers; and Jones (1985) studied groups of transition children in first through third grades and in each case compared them to at-risk children whose parents had refused transition placement. In some cases the transition children started with as much as a 1.9 standard deviation advantage over their at-risk counterparts. Gain scores from the beginning to end of first grade showed no differences between the two groups. By the end of second grade the advantage of the transition group had substantially diminished, and by third grade there were no significant

differences on four tests. In one third grade group, a non-significant difference favored the at-risk, non-transition group.

The researchers found two studies showing positive effects. Turley (1979) found a strong positive effect for kindergarten retention. When measured at the end of first grade, the retained children were approximately eight months ahead in reading and math compared to those who had been recommended to repeat kindergarten. Because the district was in a very high socio-economic community, the unready, non-retained children were themselves eight or more months above national norms. The other positive study was reported by Dolan (1982). Dolan's study had approximately five children in the "parent refusal" group in follow-up grades, and the refusal group was not statistically significant. However, when significant results were obtained, they favored the transition group. The groups were not significantly different in second grade reading or fifth grade math and reading. Dolan's analysis did not adjust for initial differences between the groups.

Three negative studies by Hunter (1975), Sheets (1977), and Wilson and Hewett (1978) were classified as uncontrolled. Three other uncontrolled studies by Ford

(1985), Duhe', Green, Taylor, Frank and Dunlap (1984) and a study in the Brevard County public schools (1987) showed gains by retaining.

Shepard and Smith (1987) also conducted a study to assess the effect of kindergarten retention on first-grade achievement and adjustment. Forty children who had been retained in kindergarten were identified from schools that retained a high rate of kindergarten children. Control children were selected from schools matched on socio-economic and achievement level, but who did not retain children in kindergarten. Then, control children were selected individually to match retained children by gender, birthdate, socio-economic level, second language, and beginning kindergarten readiness scores. The two groups, which were matched for developmental age and unready at the start of kindergarten, were compared at the end of first grade on seven outcome measures; the retained children were then completing three years of school and the control children two. There were no differences between the retained and control children on teacher ratings of reading achievement, math achievement, social maturity, learner self-concept, or attention. The groups also did not differ in Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) math scores; the only difference occurred on the CTBS reading test where

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the retained group was one month ahead. Based on parent interview data, children who had spent an extra year before first grade were not much different from those deemed at risk but not retained, except that some retained children had a slightly more negative attitude toward school. Their findings show that retaining kindergartners has no academic benefit for the extra year and has a negative impact on socio-emotional outcomes of first graders who were retained in kindergarten.

In a climate of extreme opinions, it is important to study the specific effects of kindergarten retention. Relatively few studies have been conducted examining the long-term effects of retaining kindergartners and of the Cell Developmental Test.

The purpose of this study is to compare the academic growth of children by the end of third grade between those who attended one year of kindergarten and those who attended two years of kindergarten.

METHOD

Subjects

One hundred forty-two students were studied from three elementary schools north of San Francisco, California. As indicated in Table 1, school A had a total population of

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345 students; the ethnic makeup consisted of Asian (2.6%), Hispanic (7.5%), Black (1.4%), and White (87.8%). School B had a total population of 345 students; the ethnic makeup consisted of Asian (.8%), Hispanic (9.4%), Black (1.1%) and White (88.7%). School C had a total population of 357 students; the ethnic makeup consisted of Asian (1%), Hispanic (4%), Black (0%), and White (95%). The average enrollment for grades K-6 was 349 for these three schools. The average student ethnic makeup of the three schools was Asian (1.5%), Hispanic (7.0%), Black (.83%), and White (90.4%).

Insert Table 1 here

Of the 142 children, 117 were promoted and 25 retained in kindergarten. In this sample, 73 were male and 69 were female. Ten of the children who were promoted were suggested for retention in kindergarten.

All fourth, fifth, and sixth grade children who had attended these schools since kindergarten and had taken a Gessel Developmental Test when entering school were

identified. Also, to be included in this study, students had to have documented third grade CTBS scores in their cumulative folder. Approximately 2.8% of the sample group came from a low socio-economic level, as reported by the reduced/free hot lunch list; 2.8% were placed in the Resource Special Program; and 1.4% were placed in the English as a Second Language Program.

Procedure

Data were analysed and means and standard deviation were calculated based on the standard overall reading score reported on the third grade reading test. The "t" statistic was used to test for significance between the scores of the children who attended kindergarten one year and those who attended two years. A level of significance was set at ($p=.05$).

Insert Table 2 about here

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The calculated t statistic was .47, indicating no significant difference between the tests' scores of the retained and promoted students.

When examining these results, it is important to remember that the retained children were approximately a year older than the promoted children at the time the tests were given. In spite of this, their average reading score was lower than the younger children's scores who had been promoted. It appears that the extra year of school has not helped the retained children's scores on these standard measures of school performance.

The results of this study contradict the academic rationale for the Gesell Institute's advocacy of developmental placement. In this study, there were no positive effects of retaining children in kindergarten on children's later academic achievement.

SUMMARY

The results of this study supported the majority of studies in other parts of the country over the past 80 years and showed that retaining students did not serve the intended purpose of increasing the student's growth academically. In summary, evidence shows retention is not effective and some studies show it is even harmful to children.

In spite of the high goals and idealistic philosophies common in education, it is apparent that actual practices may be founded on little or no evidence. Historically, practice and research findings do not support retention as educationally sound, yet schools feel pressure to institute policies to upgrade the educational standards. Actions such as retention may be the result of external pressures, but are unsupported by research studies.

Since Gesell's original work, research has produced new data. Many researchers and educators today agree that a child's learning is dependent upon multiple influences at any given point in time and, although developmental maturation is important, this is but one factor in a child's ability to learn and profit from school experience. Educators today face the challenge of designing curricula and classrooms that can accommodate children exhibiting a variety of developmental levels,

interests, and abilities, rather than assuming the "gift of time" will enable children to fit into the classroom.

Mergendoller, Bellisimo, and Horan (1990) summarized "As our knowledge of learning and our ability to design schools to better facilitate learning progresses, we suspect the Gesell Test, and the maturationist view of human development that it reflects, will be seen as a well-intentioned but fundamentally-flawed approach to help children learn."

As Ernest House (1989) states in his position on retention, "I expect the effort to abolish student retention in the United States to be long and hard. It is a practice, like bleeding patients, that exists with public approval because professionals don't know what else to do with certain students and because it serves important vested interests in the society as a whole."

Educators continuously examine and improve educational practices. The writer believes that strong evidence exists for relaxing retention policies and supports educators in examining this practice. Retention is a major intervention in a child's life that removes the child from the peer group. The stress and disappointment associated with failure, the monetary cost of another year of school, and the extra

year of schooling in the child's life are substantial costs. As retention is not the answer, other options such as tutoring or developing Individualized Educational Programs for each at-risk student need to be implemented to ensure that new approaches to master information are provided. Further research is suggested on alternatives to retention.

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TABLE 1

<u>ETHNIC MAKEUP OF THREE SCHOOLS</u>				
	<u>School A</u>	<u>School B</u>	<u>School C</u>	<u>Average</u>
Total				
Population	345	345	357	349
Asian	2.6%	.8%	1%	1.5%
Hispanic	7.5%	9.4%	4.%	7.0%
Black	1.4%	1.1%	0%	.83%
White	87.8%	88.7%	94.7	90.4%

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TABLE 2

Tests of Significance of Mean Differences Between
Promoted and Retained Kindergarten Students

	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>t</u>
retained	649.4	67.9	
n=25			
			.47
Not retained	654.9	49.1	
n=117			
Total			
n=142			
p = .05			